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ABSTRACT

Affective experiences have been shown to influence student self-concept and to influence and predict academic achievement. In the present research, two groups of seventh-grade boys and girls numbering 30 in all participated in either facilitated or directed affective experiences in which they explored personal feelings and attitudes toward school, family, peers, and life in general. An equally large control group did not participate in affective experiences. The facilitated group demonstrated significantly more positive self-concept change than did directed or control groups. (Descriptions of directed and facilitated forms of affective experience are appended.) (Author/RH)

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Self-Concept Change As a Function of Affective Experience

Abstract

Affective experiences have been shown to influence student self-concept as well as to influence and predict academic achievement. In this research, two groups of seventh-grade boys and girls participated in either facilitated or directed affective experience in which they explored personal feelings and attitudes toward school, family, peers, and life in general. A control group participated in no affective experience. The facilitated group demonstrated significantly more positive self-concept change than the directed group or the control group. Descriptions and examples of the forms of affective experience are given.

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Self-Concept Change As a Function of Affective Experience

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Introduction

Positive self-concept in students has long been an interest of psychologists and educators. Psychologists such as Carl Rogers and Clark Moustakas hold that positive self-concept is the most crucial factor for the success of the learning person (Moustakas, 1966; Moustakas & Perry, 1973; Rogers, 1969), and educators point out that enhancement of student self-concept is important both as an educational outcome and as a moderator of academic achievement (e.g., Shavelson, Hubner, & Stanton, 1976).

Empirical evidence is considerable that self-concept predicts and influences achievement in school, from the primary grades through undergraduate education (e.g., Wylie, 1974, 1979). Early research demonstrated a substantial association between self-concept and academic achievement (e.g., Brookover, Thomas, & Paterson, 1964; Joe, 1971; Morse, 1964) as well as its predictive ability as early as kindergarten (Wattenberg & Clifford, 1964). More recent research continues to confirm the strong relationship between self-concept and

scholastic achievement (Primavera, Simon, & Primavera, 1974; Scheirer & Kraut, 1979; Simon & Simon, 1975; Stenner & Katzenmeyer, 1976) and the ability of self-concept measures to predict academic performance (Bridgeman & Shipman, 1978; Chang, 1976; Cole, 1974; Ellerman, 1980; Shavelson et al., 1976).

Self-concept has also been found to remain stable over time in the absence of enhancing (or deleterious) experiences (Brookover et al., 1964; Prawat, 1976), but to change as a function of various experiences and influences. For example, previous success is a major contributor to positive self-concept (Kifer, 1975; Peterson, Burton, & Baker, 1983). Factors with strong affective and/or experiential and interpretational components include school variables such as teacher perceptions of student ability or worth (Covington & Beery, 1976; Eato & Lerner, 1981; Purkey, 1978; Schofield, 1981; Simpson, 1978; Wolf & Wenzl, 1982), family variables such as degree of harmony in the home and amount of encouragement to perform well academically (Bowman, 1965; Kifer, 1975; McClelland, 1955; McClelland, Baldwin, Bronfenbrenner, & Strodtbeck, 1958; Parish & Nunn, 1981; Pierce & Bowman, 1960), and peer variables such as acceptance within groups (Bilby, Brookover, & Erickson, 1972; Eato & Lerner, 1981; Hamachek, 1977; Slavin, 1980; Wolf & Wenzl, 1982).

Since relationships and interpersonal-interaction variables occurring in the school environment have been identified as influencing student self-concept (e.g., the literature cited above), these variables (or the lack of them) can help develop (or undermine) scholastic potential in students (Shaha & Wittrock, 1983). Also, since educational and psychological growth appear interdependent (Leamon, 1982; Scheirer & Kraut, 1979), it becomes important to determine and promote the change-producing variables involved in affective experiences which enhance student self-concept. To-date, research on school-initiated affective-education experiences reveals mainly that some programs achieve gains in self-concept and/or academic performance and some do not (e.g., see reviews by Baskin & Hess, 1980, and Medway & Smith, 1978). Is it the activities or specific curriculum that makes the difference, for instance, or variables within the experiencing itself, such as form or style of facilitating learning and/or experiencing, facilitator interpersonal characteristics, judgmental versus nonjudgmental atmosphere, self-determined participation levels and activities, etc.?

Research Design

The present study was a matched pretest-posttest control-group experiment designed to examine effects on self-concept of two forms of affective experiencing--directed versus facilitated--holding constant the classroom topics under discussion and the

relationship variables of general warmth, empathic understanding, unconditional positive regard, and genuineness. In both experimental groups, the primary goal of the experimenters was to provide an atmosphere in which the students would be aware of and interested in utilizing opportunity for affective experiencing.

The independent variable was form of affective experience: One form was experimenter-directed; the other, experimenter-facilitated. Affective experiencing was operationally defined as interpersonal interaction, exploration of personal conflict, and expression of feelings and attitudes among peers regarding school, family, peers, and/or life in general. The dependent variable was scores on the Self-Appraisal Inventory measure of self-concept (Instructional Objectives Exchange, 1972), an instrument based on research and evaluation by Coopersmith (1967) and Wylie (1961). Four dimensions of self-concept are measured: Scholastic, family, peer, and general.

Hypotheses

The primary research question was what kind of affective experience would facilitate maximal self-concept gain. It was hypothesized that the form of affective experience would influence the degree of self-concept change associated with the affective experience.

It was also hypothesized that the form of affective experience

would influence student perception of interest and value of the experience, rated by students on a scale from 0 to 12.

Method

Subjects

Thirty students from a seventh-grade health class were randomly assigned to two experimental groups, although male and female students were equally distributed so that each group contained six males and nine females. Thirty other seventh-grade health students served as controls and did not participate in either affective experience.

Experimental Controls

Two experimenters conducted the project. Both were psychology graduate students with two years' experience in client-centered facilitation of groups and in working with adults and children either in teaching or therapy settings. To determine whether or not the experimenters were able to convey adequately an interpersonal atmosphere encouraging of affective exploration, student ratings of the relationship variables of warmth, empathic understanding, unconditional positive regard, and genuineness were taken at midpoint and project end.

To control for potential experimenter bias, relationship-ability differences, or other experimenter effects, the experimenters alternated groups at midpoint, after being rated by students in their initial groups on the four

relationship variables. The experimenters were rated on these variables at project end by their second group. The form of affective experience was thus maintained for each group; the experimenters were required to change modes (i.e., direct the experience in one form and facilitate it in the other). Each group experienced and rated each of the two experimenters but remained within a single experimental condition, either directed or facilitated.

The three groups (two experimental and one control) were statistically equated for small initial self-concept pretest differences by analysis of covariance.

Procedure

In the experimenter-directed condition, the experimenter led the group in planned activities, directed group discussions, and occasionally taught in the traditional (teacher-talking/students-listening) manner on affective concerns. For the most part, discussions took place in an intact group rather than in several separate units. Although the degree of structure within the activities resembled that of a traditional classroom, judgment and criticism of student expressions were avoided.

In the experimenter-facilitated condition, no class activities were planned. Students were encouraged to interact with one another in ways that were personally meaningful on topics concerning school, family, peers, or life in general. The

degree of verbal exchange and social interaction was high. Students were encouraged to interact with one another and talk in general about their own concerns and interests or conflicts. Appendix A contains examples of discussions occurring within each group form.

Results

The primary research hypothesis was supported in that the facilitated experimental group evidenced significantly greater self-concept gain than the directed group (analysis of covariance: $F = 8.85$; $df = 1/42$; $p < .01$). Neither the directed group nor the control group exhibited significant self-concept change from pretest levels.

The mean student ratings of interest in the affective experience were 9.0 for the facilitated group and 8.2 for the directed group, on a scale from 0 to 12; mean ratings of value of the experience were 8.0 and 6.3 respectively. These group differences were not statistically significant, indicating that the students in both groups perceived the affective experiences as fairly interesting and valuable even though self-concept increased significantly only for the facilitated group.

Student group mean ratings for both experimenters on the four relationship variables ranged from 9.27 to 11.18 on a scale from 0 to 12, with no significant differences in ratings

of experimenters on any of the four variables, indicating that the experimenters were able to create adequately and equally an interpersonal atmosphere conducive to affective exploration.

There were no significant differences in self-concept change due to alternation of experimenters at midpoint (analysis of variance: $F = .734$; $df = 1/28$; $p = NS$), indicating that the experimenters were able to change affective-experience mode effectively and operate in congruence with each of the two forms.

Discussion

One factor contributing to the superiority of facilitated over directed affective experience in raising self-concept may be the greater opportunity for peer support and interaction. This research suggests, however, that the primary factor is the expression of what is real for the individual--that is, the experiencing individual's reality--rather than the expected "right" answer or "right" way to be too often typical of teacher-student interactions. In this research, it was the form or style of the interpersonal interaction that made possible significant self-concept gain, not the program activities, topics, or curriculum.

It is also interesting that sex and race of experimenters apparently made no difference in student ratings of relationship variables within the experiences or in judgments of interest or value. One experimenter was a female Caucasian; the other, a male Chicano.

Conclusion

The major difference between the two experimental conditions was the assumption inherent in the directed form that someone other than the experiencing individual can provide alternatives, make suggestions, or direct activity or feeling toward an affective goal. In this research into self-concept, however, the self-concept of students was significantly raised only through facilitated affective experiencing which the students chose, developed, and explored themselves. Both affective exploration and self-concept gain seem to take place as a consequence of the open, nondirective facilitation style.

This research is supported by research in clinical psychology which demonstrates consistently that behavior change and task completion may occur for several reasons but psychological growth occurs only through self-involved, personally meaningful experiencing.

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Appendix A

Example of a directed discussion regarding school:

Question: What's so bad about school? (Numerous immediate complaints.) Which of these can you do anything about? (Numerous reasons why nothing can be done about anything.) What if you requested such and such from a teacher, or suggested such and such? (Stories of disastrous attempts to participate in school decision-making.) How can any of this be changed? (Replies like parental intervention and other authoritarian solutions.) Do the teachers and principal care about the students at all? (Many negatives; a few stories about "nice" teachers.) Would those teachers be interested in your ideas? (Discussion of the possible teachers and possible ideas.) What do you think might happen? (Discussion of the "maybe"'s.) Which of these possibilities we've discussed would you like to try out, just to see? (Heightened discussion.)

Example of a facilitated discussion regarding school:

A tough homework assignment being completed during this period attracts student attention. Questions are asked about it and animated complaints are made about homework, teachers, and school in general. The experimenter occasionally reflects how a student seems to be feeling about what s/he is relating. It brings up others' feelings--mainly of resentment, pressure,

frustration, and giving up. A "what's the use" attitude is explained by one student who believes "you can't win" because of the many requirements, the constant assignments, and the common practice of deducting points from grades for nonconforming behavior. Someone asks what sense it all makes if a student already knows what s/he wants to be and it does not involve college. The traditional reasons for a good academic preparation are brought up by some but not given much credibility. Someone mentions what competition and pressure for grades can do to friendships; another mentions no time for "fun" anymore; another brings up pressure to cheat for higher grades. The experimenter reflects the feelings of individuals and the group, and encourages continuing discussion.

Example of a directed discussion regarding family:

Question: What do you do when you're angry with someone or something at home but you can't do very much about it? Responses: Yell, scream, kick the dog, slam doors, turn on a record player really loud, etc. Question: Those are some alternatives. How do they make you feel better? (Discussion.) What are other alternatives where you might have more choice in the resolution of the situation? Responses: When you both cool down, you can talk about it....Sometimes you can talk your way out of whatever trouble you're in....You can sometimes get a different punishment traded for the one you got....You can tell your best friend; that makes you feel better....You can try to understand, if it's

someone like your little sister, that she doesn't know any better--but it's hard to understand sometimes....

Example of a facilitated discussion regarding family:

A girl is upset with her mother for "screaming" at her for leaving her sweater in the kitchen. Question: How does that make you feel? Downcast silence for a moment. Another student breaks in: What does your mother do about it? Reply: She says she's going to give it to Goodwill. Some understanding responses and some irritation are expressed: I know how that feels if you like your sweater....I'd just let her give the sweater to them; she'll just have to buy you another one.... I'd leave something I didn't want in the kitchen so she'd have to give that to Goodwill and I wouldn't even care....(Laughter.) I'd leave my mother! (More laughter.) Similar stories are told by other students. The girl is laughing with the other students at all the tales. The experimenter makes no attempt to suggest possible responses or solutions or to summarize alternatives.